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The Gazette

# MAGAZINE

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For years, Juan Rodriguez's day was run on a schedule set by television. An unplanned hiatus from the oh-so-little screen, terrifying at first to a tube addict, led to liberation

# Escape from planet TV

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
*Special to The Gazette*

The week I began watching television again, after 13 months of blissful abstinence, was Kathie Lee Gifford's last week as co-host of Live With Regis and Kathie Lee. Not that I would be able to catch a glimmer of the fond farewells and tearful goodbyes on the morning show. I was in Boston working on an intensive two-week job editing 4,800 new questions for the next edition of Trivial Pursuit. (Kathie Lee is immortalized in at least two questions.) However, my hotel suite was equipped with two huge TV sets sandwiching the toilet. Although I carted along a boom box and 50 CDs, I knew I'd be watching some television. There was no avoiding it any longer.

On June 6, 1999, my TV had gone kaput with a chilling scratch-and-phft sound. I was ritually gazing at the Stanley Cup finals between Buffalo and Dallas. These workmanlike teams held little attraction – you might as well watch paint dry – but the prospect of save after impossible save by flip-flopping Sabres goalie Dominic Hasek offered yet another excuse to stay riveted to what Leonard Cohen once called "that hopeless little screen." Any excuse is a good excuse for an addict.

The night my set expired, I went into shock, then panic. I work alone, I sleep alone. Television was my "friend." Being "into" pop culture, my work and relaxation routines revolved around TV. Now it had died on me. I deeply resented it for doing so. I didn't have the cash to buy a new one, and I'm not a credit kind of guy – so I was stuck in limbo without a boob tube.

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Turning one's back on television allows time to focus on alternatives to existence in front of a screen, like writing, listening to music, reading.

I missed the JFK Jr. death watch. I missed the millennium bash. I missed the Super Bowl. But what I didn't miss was the many mindless hours glued to the screen.

Now, after months of thanking Mr. Boob Tube for going kablooey on me, my hands trembled on the remote control in the hotel room. How would I feel, willingly exposing myself to what I now considered poison for mind and soul?

Dennis Miller Live, on HBO, was an unfortunate choice. I suppose you have to start somewhere, but I've always loathed this purveyor of the feces-eating grin. Still, he was in the news, so I chalked it up to keeping up to date: Miller, the former Saturday Night Live Weekend Update anchor, had been chosen to be the colour commentator for Monday Night Football. "How did that happen?" he asks disingenuously.

Miller time hasn't changed – same smirk (he still cracks up smugly at his own jokes), same sipping from his little plastic bottle of water, same "ironic" reading of the TelePrompter, full head of steam as he gets into his patented rant. The rant – long sentences and arcane cultural connections huffed and puffed together without taking a breath – seems to exist to prove that, yes, there is a place for the "literate" on TV.

Tonight the topic is rage. I sit waiting for one intelligent phrase; I get a lot of four-letter words. (I get it: "ironic rage," right?) When Miller switches to interviewing a guy from The Sopranos – he doesn't think so quick when he's flying by the seat of his pants – I switch off. I feel like opening a window, letting in some air. The windows don't open. I'm depressed already. It will be another 48 hours before I suck up the will to turn on the set again.

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When I was a TV addict, my thing was political talk shows. Campaign managers constantly fret over their candidate's ability to "talk in sound bites" and "stay on message." A reasonable concern, considering that TV excerpts from political speeches have gone from an average of 40 seconds in length to eight in the past four decades. Thus, the desperate need to sloganize. (Senator John McCain excoriated politicians who "stand on a soapbox and denounce Jerry Springer, and then go on the floor of Congress and behave like guests on his show.") The TV pundits then analyze the sound bites. Life is easier that way. Heaven forbid they should be required to wade through a policy paper. Then they'd never have time for chatter, and there would be nothing to put on political talk shows!

And that would put me in deep doodoo. TV talk shows kept me up on the movers and shakers, from Washington to Hollywood. You could watch them 24/7. That meant watching a lot of CNN, just like Saddam Hussein did when the bombs were dropping. I did it every single day of my life for years.

So at 12:30 p.m., while I ate lunch on a tray, it was time for Burden of Proof, hosted by legal eagles Greta van Susteren and Roger Cossack, who came to fame during the O.J. Simpson trial. At 3 p.m., there was Talk Back Live, an "interactive" affair – connecting studio audience, guests staring into cameras strewn around the planet, E-mailed and faxed missives, and Internet video images – proving that folks high and low will go to any technological lengths to chip in their 2 cents' worth.

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# Papers, pols make hay with Trudeau's death

In a poem composed "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," W.H. Auden wrote:

*"For one who'd lived among enemies so long:*
*If often he was wrong and, at times, absurd,*
*To us he is no more a person*
*Now but a whole climate of opinion"*

Had Auden written his poem in praise of Jean Chrétien, he surely would have amended the last line to read "contradictory opinions." Chrétien is a politician for all platforms. Having pilfered Brian Mulroney's GST and NAFTA initiatives, he is, simultaneously, advertising himself as the true heir of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who was opposed to a free-trade deal.

Incidentally, I knew weeks ago that our former minister of Indian Affairs was planning an election for Nov. 27, because in the late watches of the night he had been seen doing a snow dance in the gardens of 24 Sussex Drive, praying for blizzards on that date on both the Prairies and Quebec's Bloquiste North Shore.

I was in New York when Trudeau died, coming home just in time to catch the debate between Joe Lieberman's shabbos goy, Al Gore, and Dubya, obviously not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Clearly, the political choices available to Americans are no more thrilling than what will be on offer here.

On my return to our cottage in the Eastern Townships, I was confronted with a mound of newspapers ostensibly mourning Trudeau's death, but actually tarnished by some of the most embarrassing pseudo-poetic prose I had ever read. I discovered that a lone heron had taken flight from a marsh as Trudeau's train passed and, elsewhere, that somebody who had never known Trudeau had lost his best friend. Another journalist wrote, "Now Pierre Elliott Trudeau has embarked on his last canoe trip into the wilder ness. He is gliding down the dark waters of the river Styx, searching for his lost child. They will soon be reunited."

Oh dear oh dear.

MORDECAI RICHLER

Hacks at their most mawkish were the unhappy rule in both the Globe and Mail, a fading Toronto newspaper, and our own dazzling National Post, wherein, much to my horror, a columnist recently dubbed a waiter a "waitperson." THE WORLD MOURNS ran a front-page Globe and Mail headline, and its Page 9 story noted that among the dignitaries attending the funeral there would be Najib Zerouali, minister of scientific research, Morocco; Louis Tull, former foreign minister, Barbados; and Hans Matthoeffer, former finance minister of Germany. Admirable gentlemen I'm sure, but not exactly on the international A-list.

True, the New York Times began a lengthy and respectful obit on its front page, but it didn't consider Trudeau's passing of sufficient importance to be listed in its Sunday roundup of the week's significant news. The New York Daily news, albeit owned by a Canadian expat, saw things differently. Its front page featured a mob boss – SICK FELLA: Imprisoned Gotti fighting for life as throat cancer returns – and only on Page 42 did it remember to briefly note EX-CANADIAN POL TRUDEAU DIES, 80.

In Walker Percy's splendid first novel, The Moviegoer, the protagonist doesn't believe his home town is real until it is featured in a movie. Such is our continuing national insecurity that we suffer from a similar need. We require outsiders to confirm that Canada exists. So the National Post ran a survey of how foreign newspapers dealt with Trudeau's death. We were treated to something like a Canadian death box score: "The last Canadian to rate a front-page obituary in the New York Times was pianist Glenn Gould in 1982. John George Diefenbaker, the former Canadian prime minister who died in 1979, was slotted on Page 16, while author Robertson Davies, who died in 1995, was on Page 9 of the second section."

Justin Trudeau's affecting eulogy was universally praised, deservedly so, but surely a drama teacher should have known better than to begin, "Friends, Romans, countrymen," invoking the conspirator Antony's cunning funeral oration for Caesar, undertaken only after Antony had met with the assassins: "I doubt not of your wisdom. Let each man render me his bloody hand."

Anyway, it now seems that Trudeau's death is to be exploited in a premature election by his self-appointed heir, Jean Chrétien, vs. what, in Joe Louis's day, was called the Bums-of-the-Month Club, namely Stockwell, Joe and Alexa. Like you, I can hardly contain my excitement.

JOE SCHWARCZ C5 ◆ DAVE BARRY C5 ◆ WHAT'S ON C6 ◆ SOAPS C7 ◆ THE SIMPSONS C10

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